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SUBJECT: TRA VINH PROTESTANTS AND OFFICIALS EXCHANGE VIEWS ON
RELIGIOUS FREEDOM PROBLEMS

REF: A) HCMC 1016 REF B) HCMC 0154 REF C) HCMC 0651

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11. (SBU) Summary: During a November 18 visit to Tra Vinh, PolOffs raised a number of issues reported by both recognized and unrecognized Protestant congregations over the past year with provincial officials. These incidents of religious freedom violations represent a small number of the worst types of discrimination some religious groups still face in Vietnam, despite generally improving conditions for most denominations. While provincial officials readily listened to reports from PolOffs and representatives from the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) and did not deny the occurrences, they also complained to PolOffs that Protestant groups are "unstable" and thus difficult to administer, often setting back the registration process by changing their affiliations multiple times. Tra Vinh Protestants said authorities are deliberately delaying registering their congregations and complained about harassment and beatings at the hands of local police and Buddhist residents who are intolerant of different religious practices. Tra Vinh Protestants also said many have been pressured to renounce their faith and wondered why no disciplinary action has been taken. The incidents point out the need for continued rule of law reform so that all types of minority groups in Vietnam not only have the right to worship freely, but have those rights protected by local authorities in communities where intolerance and discrimination exist. End Summary.

Protestant Problems in Predominantly Buddhist Province

12. (SBU) Protestants are experiencing difficult times in the Delta province of Tra Vinh, where Theravada Buddhism is the predominant faith. Within the past year, five Protestant groups -- two nationally recognized and three unrecognized -- have reported problems with local authorities. The issues ranged from officials not accepting registration documents, disrupting services and calling pastors in for police questioning to harassment and physical attacks by local Buddhist residents which were witnessed by police and officials. The churches accused local authorities of allowing the attacks on Protestants and supporting discriminatory attitudes against new religious groups. (Note: Approximately 30 percent of Tra Vinh's population of 1.1 million residents is Khmer. All but a few thousand Khmer follow Theravada Buddhism and life in the Khmer community revolves around the Theravada Buddhist pagodas. End Note). In some cases, severe harassment has led some Protestants to move away from problem districts and several have approached ConGen's Humanitarian Resettlement Section regarding the possibility of resettling in the U.S.

13. (SBU) In a November 18 meeting between PolOffs and members of the Tra Vinh Provincial People's Committee, Committee for

Religious Affairs (CRA) and Ethnic Minority Committee, PolOffs raised the incidents reported by the SECV, Vietnam Inter-Christian Fellowship (VCIF), the Full Gospel Church, the Life Gospel Church and the United Khmer Christian Church in the Duyen Hai, Tra Cu and Tieu Can districts of Tra Vinh.

Tra Vinh Authorities Speak

¶4. (SBU) In response, Tra Vinh officials admitted to PolOffs that some local officials did not correctly implement regulations and laws on religion. However, the violations did not warrant punishment, they claimed. They complained that Protestants are "not stable," and constantly change their denominations. Entire congregations change from one affiliation to another and if these groups had "true faith," they would be registered, officials said.

¶5. (SBU) Provincial authorities asserted that Protestant missionaries go to the poorest communities and give away money to attract followers, then Protestants from other groups come and give more money to join their group. On the registration process, groups often file for registration but then change their affiliation before the registration process on the original application is completed, the officials declared. If Protestant groups were "long-term and stable," they would be registered, authorities stated. (Comment: While it is tempting to dismiss charges of "convert buying" out of hand, provincial authorities are not the only ones making such charges. Well-respected Protestant leaders from other parts of Vietnam have previously lodged identical complaints against other denominations. End Comment.)

¶6. (SBU) As for a series of alleged incidents of religious intolerance reported by the Full Gospel Church where local authorities have allegedly disrupted house church services, threatened congregants with fines if they did not renounce their faith and failed to protect several followers from two beatings

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inflicted by local residents in January and May, provincial officials implied that the church leaders were unstable because they had changed affiliations from Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) to the Pentecostal to the Full Gospel Church. Officials said another pastor from the also-unrecognized Life Gospel Church organized literacy classes which should not have included religious material, so police questioned him in 2007, then publicly denounced him for violating the law in July. Life Gospel Church members contended, however, that the pastor was denounced for practicing his religious beliefs, not violating regulations.

¶7. (SBU) In a separate incident, a pastor of the United Khmer Christian Church in Tra Cu District reported she and 15 congregants received death threats from locals who gathered around her house in September, 2008. The pastor said the group began throwing stones at her house and turning away followers who arrived for services, while local police officials looked on. In October, the reported harassment grew so severe that the pastor and her family fled to HCMC.

¶8. (SBU) Provincial authorities claimed that the congregation's pastor used to be with the SECV, then switched to the VCIF, which ordained her, then filed registration documents. The pastor then changed to the United Khmer Christian Church, causing the VCIF to cut ties with her. (Note: The United Khmer Christian Church affiliated with Central Highlands Pastor Nguyen Cong Chinh's Vietnamese People's Evangelical Fellowship(VPEF), an umbrella organization claiming to represent more than 60 Protestant denominations and all 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam (Ref C). The pastor's affiliation with VPEF may also be a reason authorities are particularly suspicious of her activities. End note.) Aside from her denominational changes, officials said the pastor used a loudspeaker to preach causing neighbors to petition village authorities to put a stop to the nuisance. Local authorities then warned her to stop disturbing her neighbors. Later, police intervened after "an incident"

took place at the pastor's home, the authorities added.

SECV Confronts Tra Vinh Officials

¶9. (SBU) In a separate meeting with the head SECV pastor in Tra Vinh, over 15 deacons and followers, the Tra Vinh External Relations Director and the Vice Director of the Tra Vinh Internal Affairs Department, the pastor and others candidly complained about the state of affairs in Tra Vinh. (Note: The pastor is a member of the majority Kinh, but roughly two thirds of SECV members in Tra Vinh belong to the Khmer minority. End note). The pastor contrasted Tra Vinh to neighboring Vinh Long province where the SECV is apparently experiencing no difficulties registering congregations or operating according to government requirements.

¶10. (SBU) In one instance, after the SECV had filed for registration of a local congregation, its leader had passed away. The congregation notified the local CRA that his son had replaced him as the new leader. The pastor noted that the congregation covered three communes and had to file the registration application twice. The pastor claimed the authorities turned down the first application after a long "processing" time on the premise that the congregation's meeting place was not legal. The pastor said he awaits a reply to the second application. Authorities mentioned this situation to PolOffs during the meeting described above, highlighting the change in leadership as the reason the application was taking a long time to process.

¶11. (SBU) The authorities at the provincial and commune level "keep passing the ball to each other," the pastor lamented. The Tra Vinh CRA says it is the commune authorities' responsibility to issue the registration certificate while the commune authorities tell the pastor that they need a written approval from higher authorities, the pastor added.

¶12. (SBU) Several of the assembled SECV followers complained about harassment and even beatings at the hands of local police and thugs, who were predominantly Khmer Buddhists. When followers gather for prayer, "government people" are waiting at the entrance to put their names on a list, one parishioner said. Later, those on the list are called in and pressured to renounce their faith, he added. The pastor himself complained that local authorities orchestrated attacks against him and his followers two times in 2007. Even his status as a member the Fatherland Front did not help, he said.

¶13. (SBU) In one incident (reftels), after "rescuing" SECV believers from a blockade of local Buddhists, the police took them to the local station and put them in separate rooms for

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questioning, the SECV pastor continued. After the two hour session at the police station, over 200 Buddhists "at the chief monk's command" beat them in front of local officials, the pastor asserted. (Note: At the conclusion of the meeting, the SECV pastor provided PolOffs Vietnamese language letters from police summoning parishioners for questioning and x-rays of people allegedly beaten. End Note). The pastor and the assembled SECV followers expressed frustration that the local Chairman of the People's Committee was later praised for his "good performance."

¶14. (SBU) The provincial authorities in the meeting did not try to silence or take issue with the incidents raised by the SECV. In response to the complaints, the Tra Vinh Internal Affairs Vice Director, who is also the head of the Tra Vinh CRA, said the CRA will report to provincial leaders and organize a meeting so that representatives of the different religious groups can sit together and seek ways "to promote harmonious relations." In an aside to poloff, he added that "personality conflicts" were also driving these incidents. The Internal Affairs Vice Director also stressed to the group that the problems with the SECV are not indicative of the larger religious freedom situation in Tra Vinh. This prompted one parishioner to say

that his family "is living in fear" because local thugs have gone unpunished.

Comment: Religious Diversity Requires Rule of Law

¶15. (SBU) Although the Khmer community in Tra Vinh is strong locally, in the country as a whole the Khmer are a double minority, vastly outnumbered by the Kinh majority and by those who follow Mahayana Buddhism. Complaints received from Khmer Protestants indicate pressure comes from their Khmer and Kinh Buddhist neighbors as well as from local officials who are extremely suspicious of Protestantism. The fact that several Khmer Protestant leaders are former Theravada Buddhist leaders who converted to Protestantism while in refugee camps in Thailand in the early 1990's only darkens the cloud they are under. Under these unusual circumstances, it is plausible that local officials might have incited mobs or taken a passive stance when thugs beat up Protestant converts. In the past, the congregations have been reluctant to have Post raise their cases with the national CRA, preferring to handle their issues internally, but their leaders are increasingly frustrated with the GVN's inaction.

¶16. (SBU) It is important to note that while these incidents are isolated and represent the worst-case scenarios in terms of religious freedom's lack of progress in some areas of Vietnam, they also point to a much larger issue--the GVN's inability to protect the rights of minorities, whether they are religious, ethnic or otherwise "different" from the majority. Whether the CRA is sympathetic to the issues of these groups or not, they do not have the resources or authority to actually protect minority religious groups from discrimination and harassment by private citizens. That responsibility lies with local officials and police. The authorities' failure to do so in Tra Vinh again points to the serious need for rule of law reform at all levels of government in Vietnam.

¶14. (SBU) This cable was co-written with Embassy Hanoi.
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